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THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE
NEW ENGLAND DWELLING HOUSE

BY HENRY B. WORTH, NEW BEDFORD, MASS.

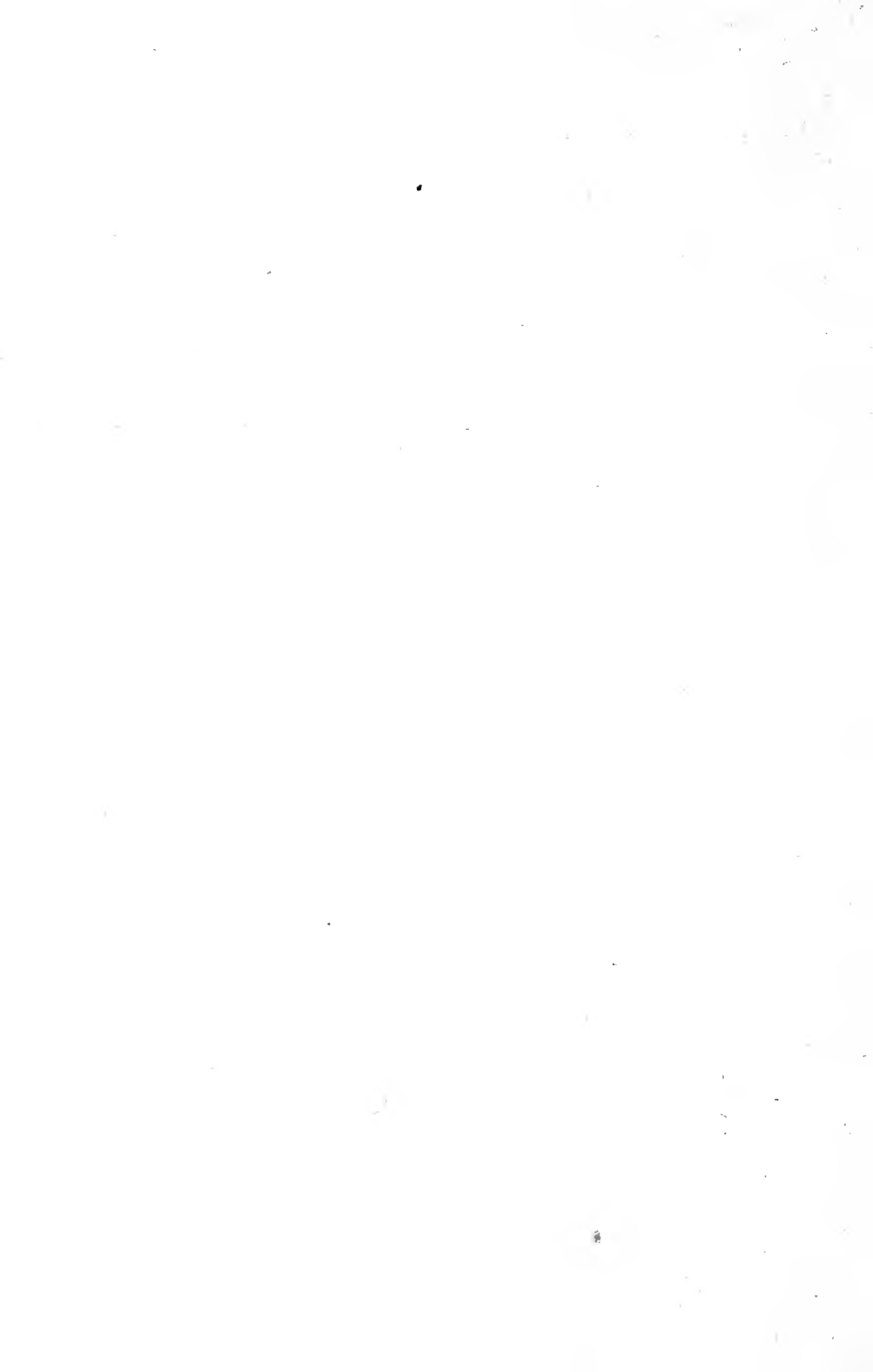
READ BEFORE THE LYNN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MARCH 10, 1910

FROM VOLUME XIV OF THE REGISTER OF THE SOCIETY



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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW ENGLAND DWELLING-HOUSE

HENRY B. WORTH, New Bedford, Mass., March 10, 1910

The Department of Historical Research that appeals most keenly to popular taste is the determination of the age of ancient houses. But to reach definite results the student must pursue three lines of investigation: 1: The location, position, shape, size, arrangement and construction of the house must be carefully considered. As far as they were able, the early settlers grouped their houses in a center around a town square or common, and later, when the demands of the people required, and safety from Indian depredations was assured, they built in more remote parts of the town. The first houses were near the salt water where the white men could find refuge. Not before the King Philip's War (1675-1676) did settlers venture far away from the sea. The early houses generally fronted the south, without regard to their relations to adjacent roads, and consequently are often found standing end or back to the nearest street. Volumes have been written concerning the construction of houses. In the first place it is necessary to decide whether the entire structure is of one date or an aggregation of additions and alterations of different ages. Then the size of brick in chimneys is often of significance, because the Colonists manufactured brick of different dimensions than were made in European yards, and were more crude and imperfect in finish. It was not until after

1700 that New England people generally were able to import the small and finely constructed product of the old country.

The frame and method of joining furnish a valuable guide in determining the period of construction. It is essential next to consider the history of the town, when and by whom it was settled, and in what section the homes were first located. The history of social, economic and industrial conditions has an important bearing on the problem. Larger and finer houses would be found in a wealthy community than in a town of farmers. The most difficult part of the investigation is the examination of public and private records and the discovery of facts that are to be found only in ancient documents. The family history of all the owners of the land must be ascertained, and every stray fact compiled in deeds, wills, old diaries and account books.

When all these facts have been collected and compared it is possible to reach a conclusion which will be very nearly correct. But such an investigation is possible only to persons of special training, and requires considerable time and travel when the registries are in widely separated towns. Consequently, it is apparent that this interesting department of history must remain a sealed book to all except expert antiquaries unless there can be discovered some method of determining the age of ancient dwellings based chiefly upon an exterior examination of the house itself. If some such practical system could be used, which would attain reasonably approximate results, much of the story of the past would be revealed to persons travelling rapidly through the country.

By careful study and comparison of a large number of cases, it has been found that domestic architecture in

New England has developed along well defined lines and in accordance with laws readily comprehended, and that when this development is understood the student is in possession of a system of examination which will yield results often surprisingly accurate.

The first habitations were log cabins or cellars dug in hillsides. Very soon these were followed by small houses, rude and temporary in construction, that met the immediate necessities of the settlers, but were of no permanent character. Having provided for his family the best dwelling that was within his reach, the settler next turned his attention to the resources at his command. The long process of developing these resources can best be appreciated by reading the story as it appears in the usual first book of records of a New England town. Delicate questions which arose in adjusting relations with the Indians: establishment of mills, the church, school, tavern and store: bringing the earth into a state of production: these and other enterprises in their endless ramifications required nearly a generation to settle and determine, and there was little opportunity to accumulate a surplus beyond the mere necessities of life. From this it follows as a general rule neither permanent nor enduring houses were built during the first twenty years after the settlement of any community. A few isolated exceptions to this rule may be cited, and if such be authenticated by careful investigation it will be found that they are confined mostly to the mercantile centers of New England particularly, Portsmouth, Boston, Providence and Newport. So universally sound has this principle been proved that the most convincing evidence should be required to substantiate a claim that any house was built at an earlier period. For years it was claimed that the Peter Tufts House of Medford (the so-called

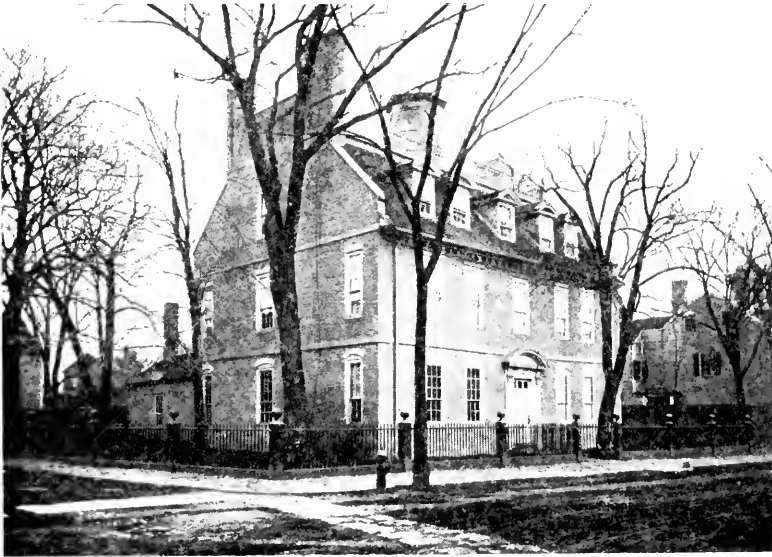
Craddock house) was built in 1634, the same year that the town was settled; but it has finally been established that its date was forty years later.



Peter Tufts or Craddock House, Medford, Mass.

The second principle, which is the most important in the method under discussion, is that the leading men in New England in all communities and in each period adopted the same shape and style of house. In Colonial days there were no architects, and as far as architecture may have existed, it was exercised by the carpenter and was very simple. The leading men were generally of one rank and substantially of the same degree of wealth, and for this reason had very similar tastes. Both labor and materials would lend themselves more readily to one style of building than to several. Mechanics could learn to build one style of house more easily and at less cost than to

accomplish such variety as existed in Virginia, therefore a single style became the dominant type throughout New England in each period, subject, however, to the single modification that in remote sections a given style lingered after it had been discarded in the larger communities; thus Nantucket held tenaciously to the lean-to style forty years after it had been abandoned in Massachusetts Bay.



Warner House, Portsmouth, N. H.

These dominant styles being selected by the leading men required the most enduring materials that could be procured, and were constructed by the best mechanics, and these are the houses in existence at the present date. When a particular house is recognized as being one of a leading type, the problem is to decide in what period that style prevailed, and the approximate age of the house can at once be decided. The system, therefore, is a study of

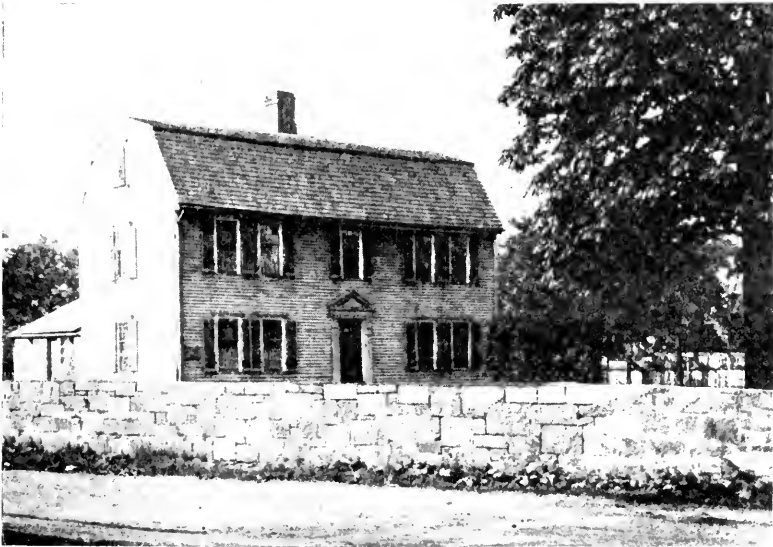
the successive types. Instances may be met where a house was built according to a plan which did not come into general use until years later. Thus the Warner house, of Portsmouth, N. H., commenced by Captain Archibald Macphedres in 1718 and completed in 1723, was a style of brick house that did not become common in Southern New England until after 1826. The two-gambrel roof additions to the Fairbanks house, of Dedham, if built in 1660, as claimed, precede that style at least half a century, but such instances are not sufficiently numerous to create confusion.



Fairbanks House, Dedham, Mass.

It is also apparent that in some places, on account of local influence, special styles of building were adopted not to be discovered elsewhere in New England. Thus the

stone end house which was the earliest Rhode Island style, is found nowhere else in Massachusetts except in the adjoining section of Buzzard's Bay in the vicinity of New Bedford, and it prevailed in this locality because the early settlers came from Rhode Island.



Dr. Flagg—Billy Gray House, Marion Street.

The event which terminated a particular style was always a war, and the order of development appears to have been as follows :

At a given date a certain type of dwelling was in general adoption by the leading residents of New England, and continued to be the prevailing style until a war occurred. During the conflict, business would be paralyzed, building operations would cease, and the attention of the inhabitants would be directed to the events of the war. After peace had been declared, a period of recovery would

ensue which usually comprised several years, and this was succeeded by an age of prosperity during which the inhabitants were able to accumulate property and wealth. Then would appear an interest in house building, and at this point it is observed that the public taste had always changed: former ideals and methods in art, education, religion and economics had become modified and the old order yielded place to new. A different style of dwelling was adopted as the prevailing type of that period, and the same cycle of events would be repeated.



Potter House, Westport, Mass.

The selection of such a prevailing style was a compromise between the needs and desires of the inhabitants on the one hand, and their resources on the other. The land owners would build the largest and best houses they could afford, and in the large towns there would be found

a two-story house of a certain date, while on a farm there would be a house of the same style with but one story.

In its interior arrangement, a dwelling house may be defined as a shelter to accommodate the four household purposes of cooking, eating, sleeping and holding social intercourse, and should therefore include a kitchen, dining-room, parlor and sleeping apartment. At first the houses had only one room, and this condition continued during the first period. The Potter house in Westport, built in 1677, and still standing, was a stone end dwelling of one story and one room, eighteen feet square, with a loft under the roof.



John Swain House, North Side, Polpis, Nantucket.
Center Section 1673, one story and one room.

It was the prevailing Rhode Island style for a generation before 1660. In other parts of the Colonies the lean-to style was adopted, like the Swain house at Nan-

tucket, the lean-to roof sloping to the north covering a low space on the north side of the single room. Before the King Philip's War, two story houses had come into general use, the upper story being devoted to sleeping rooms. The single room on the first floor was kitchen, dining-room and parlor. No house is known to exist in its original condition which was built previous to the King Philip's War. Claims are presented for an earlier origin of a few, but they have not been satisfactorily established, and in every case there have been more or less alterations from the original design.



John Swain House, South Side, Polpis, Nantucket.

After the King Philip's War (1675-1676) the next advance was made by building the lean-to house still larger and including another apartment used as a parlor. In such a house the sleeping rooms were in the second story. On the first floor was the parlor, and another large room

used as kitchen and dining-room. This was the prevailing arrangement for a century after 1675. During this long period several styles of house had come and gone, but the interior furnished accommodations for sleeping, and a parlor in a separate apartment; but the kitchen and dining-room were in one room.

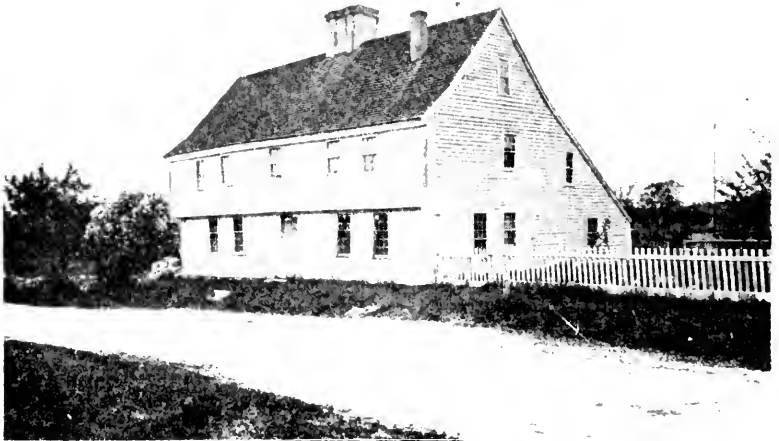


Ivory Boardman House, Saugus.

The style that was adopted after the Revolution was the full four-apartment house, and this interior arrangement has since prevailed. If a house is found designed to provide a separate apartment for each household use, except in wealthy centers, it could not have been built before the Revolution.

As practically all vestiges of house-building before 1660 have disappeared, the King Philip War is found to be a convenient starting point to classify old houses. If

any construction of an earlier date remains it is generally included as a portion of a later structure. At this date the leading type in New England was the lean-to, and the purpose of the long, sloping north roof was for protection against the north winds of winter. In such a house the low space on the north side was generally a store-room which separated the living apartment from the cold air outside. This style of house, therefore, always fronted south with-



Abijah Boardman House (front) Saugus.

out regard to the location of adjacent roads, and frequently these old dwellings stand back or end to the highway. The house before 1670 having one room in the first story, had the chimney at the end, as is shown in the view of the Potter House. Starting with the single two-story, lean-to house, the lower room serving as kitchen, dining-room and parlor, to obtain an additional apartment it was necessary

to double the house, thus producing a structure with a chimney in the center. This was sometimes accomplished by adding the second half years after the house had been originally built.



Abijah Boardman House (rear) Saugus.

The center chimney lean-to was almost the only style from 1675 to 1700, a single exception having been noted in the case of the Joseph Putnam house of Danvers, which was built previous to 1690, but was probably full two-story front and rear.

But the war that continued from 1700 to 1713 directed attention away from house building, and when the next period of prosperity opened the public taste was ready for a new design. The choice fell upon the gambrel roof which dominated the popular fancy until the beginning of the French and Indian Wars (1754-1763). This style of

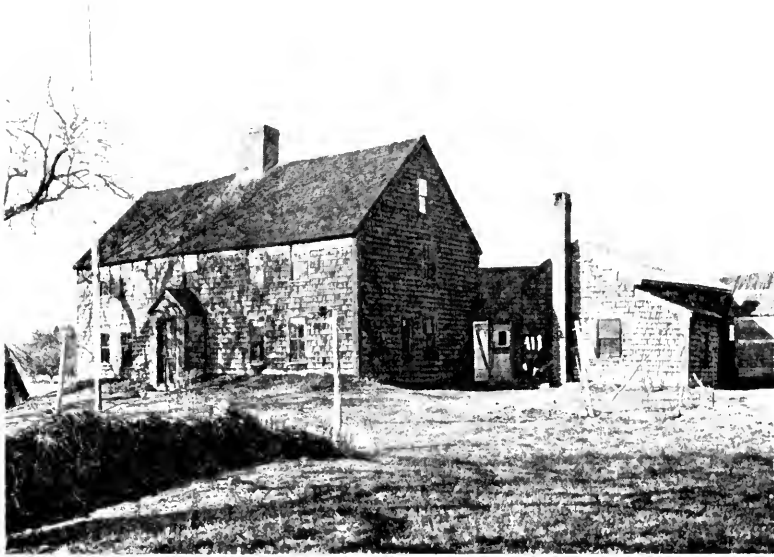


Hitchings-Draper-Hawkes House, Saugus.

house followed no uniform rule of interior arrangement except that rarely was there a separate apartment for kitchen or dining-room, but the chimney was usually near the center. At Nantucket this style never appealed to the inhabitants, but during the period when this type prevailed elsewhere the Nantucket Quakers clung to the ancient lean-to. The gambrel roof has always been the favorite style, as indicated by the fact that so many built one hundred and seventy-five years ago are still in existence, and also that in recent years this design has become very common among houses of all grades. It is a durable and economical plan built on the principle of the arch, and will endure the effect of the elements more easily than any other design.

The gambrel roof period closed with the commence-

ment of the French and Indian War. Then followed seven years of conflict, and several more of turmoil and unrest before the Revolution. If a settled peace had been established, followed by the usual period of prosperity, a new style of house would have been adopted. In many sections one type attracted considerable attention. It was a double dwelling of two stories without the lean-to, and



Joseph Putnam House, Danvers, Mass.

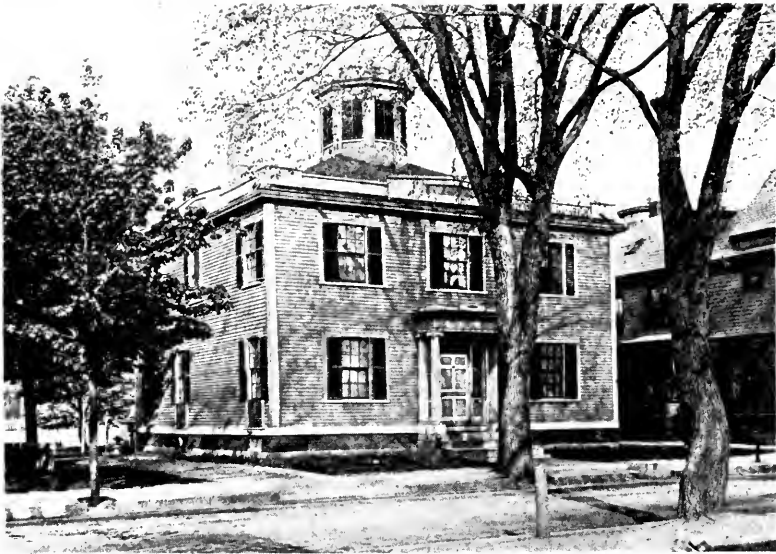
with a large center chimney. In the back part of the house was a large apartment devoted to kitchen and dining-room, and in many instances provided with a fireplace of great dimensions. Houses of this design were located to front the adjoining road. Quite likely if the opportunity had permitted this might have been the leading style at that date, but the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) followed too closely, and political and industrial affairs

were unsettled. With the Revolutionary War the career of the center-chimney house as the prevailing type in New England terminated. After seven years of struggle, and several more of recuperation a period of prosperity began in 1790 and the people of New England were prepared to adopt a new style. Having more extensive resources, they selected a design considerably in advance of any previous plan. In its interior it was so arranged that the kitchen and dining-room were separated.



Colonel Frederick Breed House, 273 Boston Street.

During a few years before and after 1800 the Dutch-cup house, sometimes having a center chimney and in other cases two chimneys were frequently selected by men of ample means. It was a house the roof of which sloped in all directions from the center, and resembled the covering commonly used by farmers to place over their haystacks.



Otis Johnson House built on Federal Street 1832, removed to 62 Mall Street 1888.

Some of the great houses of this date were built according to this plan. It was possible to construct a fine parapet rail entirely surrounding the roof; but this type did not meet with such general favor as its great rival which was a rectangular double two-story house with a central hall-way extending from front to rear, and on each side two massive chimneys. Regular and symmetrical in outline, it possessed many attractive elements in design and was durable, commodious and comfortable. After a century of trial, it is still a favorite style, as is evidenced by the fact that so many of them are still retained in all of the New England cities. It was the prevailing type between 1790 and 1812, but ceased to be the controlling style after that period except in country places where it lingered a few years later.

Then followed three years of destructive war, and several of recovery, and business finally became reëstablished during the administration of John Quincy Adams, which has been designated the "era of good feeling." Then were laid the foundations of modern fortunes, and as might be expected the New England communities were ready for a still further advanced style of house. In many respects it was like its predecessor, but the change, being



Joseph Moulton House, built 1808, 397 Boston Street.

in the interior, was occasioned by the demands of larger social gatherings. In the two-chimney house it was not possible to connect any two out of the four rooms in the lower story, and on this account a large company was accommodated in two or more of the rooms. The change now adopted was to construct the house so that the front room and that in the rear could be turned into a single apartment

by folding or sliding doors. In order to accomplish this object the great chimney of the earlier design was omitted, and a smaller chimney placed at the end of the house in



Jonathan Tarbell House, built about 1800, Lynnfield.

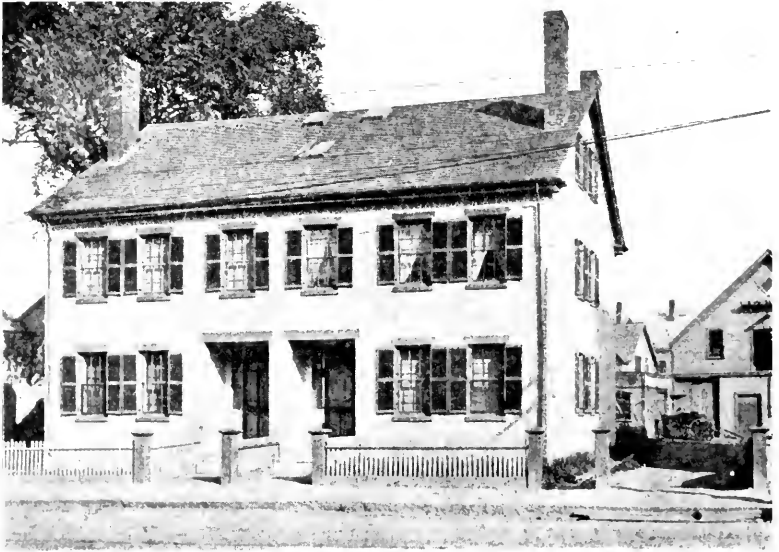
each room. In the new design, therefore, there would be four chimneys, two in each end of the structure, one for each of the lower rooms. In such a design, the kitchen and servants' quarters were usually placed in an addition. This was the plan of the great houses in Salem, New Bedford and Bristol, where rapidly acquired wealth was placed at the disposal of architects who produced some of the finest house designs in the United States.

This plan continued to be the prevailing style in wood, stone or brick until after the war with Mexico (1846-1847).

The four-chimney double house, of which the Parsons Cooke and the Davis-Newhall houses are examples, is a

type which is peculiar to Lynn, where many other examples still remain.

The full development of the dwelling-house had been reached in this period, and no further progress could be made except to increase the number of rooms for the use of each household. While the study of ancient houses does not require a consideration of the domestic architecture of the past half century, yet the evolution has been progressing along lines widely different from those which governed



House of Rev. Parsons Cooke, D. D., 697 Western Avenue.

the progression during the first two centuries after the settlement of the country. The great fortunes that have been accumulated since the Civil War have caused a wide demand for architectural talent, and the course of development has been in two general directions. First, There have arisen requirements to encompass within the walls of the

mansion, rooms intended for many other uses than were demanded by people of former times. In addition to a kitchen, dining-room, parlor and sleeping apartments, there may be over twenty additional apartments according to the taste and ambition of the house owner. The ingenuity of the architect seems to be taxed to the uttermost to multiply the different apartments that are combined in a modern structure called a dwelling. Second, The aim of each millionaire



Mayor Edward L. Davis and Judge Thomas B. Newhall House,
corner Summer and Astor Streets.

is to surpass the achievements of all competitors, and so the architect is required to produce a design differing from all others in shape, arrangement and ornamentation. During this period there has been no standard type that has received popular approval, and all activity has been directed toward novelty and an ever increasing number of apartments.

A necessary condition precedent to the development of fine houses, has always been successful attainments in maritime pursuits. Houses distinguished for design and finish are to be found chiefly in the seaport towns of New England. In this respect Lynn never achieved distinction, and consequently has few houses of the period following the War of 1812, when the wealth gathered from commerce in the Indies was expended in magnificent dwellings



Houses of Jedediah Newhall, Nathaniel Massey—Ezekiel Rand and Nathaniel Sargent, 459-473 Boston Street, built about 1795.

which have distinguished Salem and Portsmouth.

The central hallway, two-chimney house so popular in the southern parts of the state for a decade before and after 1800, did not gain as great favor in Lynn, although a few of this style are still standing. The contemporary Dutch-cap is also represented.

There are remaining a few of the two-story, center-chimney houses, built in the short period between the French and Indian War and the Revolution.

The deep interest in the gambrel-roof that was widespread through the Colonies existed in Lynn. A unique group once stood on the north side of the Boston stage-road, illustrating three periods of development.



John Burrill House, Saugus.

In the center was a Dutch cap of the type of 1800; on the west side the Jedediah Newhall gambrel of 1735 and to east a central chimney mansion of 1765.

All of the foregoing types may be observed in most of the sections of the Commonwealth, but Essex County is the most promising field to investigate the ancient lean-to. Capable of withstanding the elements for over two centuries, their owners have been willing to allow them to

stand as examples of the oldest existing houses occupied by the settlers of New England.

The Abijah Boardman house at Saugus may be selected as among the finest and oldest examples. It will be found to contain all the features of construction that were in vogue immediately before the King Philip's War. The pilastered chimney of recent workmanship but of undoubted ancient design; the second story deeply overhanging the front: the sills projecting into the rooms and at the front door cut down half the depth of the timber to reduce the height to step over; curious beading on the summers and interior beams: worm-eaten braces connecting corner-posts with girts, somewhat preserved in the mixture of brick and mortar which filled the space between the outer and inner walls. These and other structural peculiarities mark the age of the house approximately at 1670, subject to modification based on careful documentary investigation.

Until the dates of these Colonial dwellings have been finally determined by thorough study there will be a tendency to claim for them a more remote antiquity than the facts warrant. But the only sound principle to follow is to require strict proof of the date of construction of any house alleged to have been erected before 1670.

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